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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO; NEA/ARP/BMCGOVERN

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SUBJECT: DUBAI SEEKS TO IMPROVE FOOD SAFETY STANDARDS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Recent press reports about a spate of food poisoning cases in Dubai, including high-profile deaths of several children, have resulted in growing concern about food safety standards in the emirate. The Director of the Food Control Department (FCD) at Dubai Municipality attributes the increased press attention to an aggressive food safety campaign launched in 2008, however. The Municipality hopes that the increased scrutiny will lead to improve food handling practices. To that end, they welcome USG assistance. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Director of Food Control Department (FCD) at the Dubai Municipality Khalid Sharif and Senior Food Studies Officer Bobby Krishna told PolOff on August 11 that the FCD launched a food safety campaign in 2008, which has resulted in the temporary closure of dozens of restaurants and food outlets. They contend this campaign is the reason behind the increasing press attention to food safety standards and, tragically, the numerous deaths which occur here each year from improper food handling. Krishna argued that Dubai Municipality -- notoriously protective of its public reputation -- views this attention to food safety as positive. Sharif and Krishna acknowledged that Dubai lacks a robust public health infrastructure, such as a central coordinating public health body.

¶3. (SBU) Approximately 60 food poisoning cases -- about 40 resulting from the preparation of homemade food -- have been reported in Dubai in 2009. Whether this represents an increase over previous years is unknown as hospitals are not equipped to confirm suspected cases, nor is the data tracked. The FCD (rather than the Dubai Health Authority) and Dubai Police conduct food-borne illness investigations. Hospitals and private citizens report food poisoning cases directly to Dubai Police as well as the FCD via its complaint number. The Dubai Police conduct criminal investigations into suspected food poisoning cases. In those resulting in death, suspected offenders (i.e., restaurant owners) are arrested and tried.

¶4. (U) The FCD has an ambitious plan to further improve public awareness of food safety through a campaign to be launched during Ramadan. In addition to traditional outreach such as lectures and seminars, the FCD's food safety campaign includes SMS alerts, blogs, and interactive sessions on Facebook and Twitter to reach, among others, the youth population.

¶5. (SBU) Both Sharif and Krishna spoke candidly about the public health weaknesses in Dubai and expressed eagerness to collaborate with more experienced partners. Sharif specifically noted that USG assistance in establishing best practices for food safety inspections, better laboratories, and a health surveillance system would be welcome.

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